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Ruth Maxey

The Rise of the “We” Narrator in Modern American Fiction

1 As a formal device, the first-person plural narrator is both enigmatic and technically demanding; and historically it has been rare in US fiction. After all, who is “we” in the United States? Yet an increasing number of American novelists and short story writers have turned to this narrative technique over the past 20 years and particularly since 9/11 (Costello, “Plural”), revealing the continued political significance of this voice. How might one account for such a rise in collective narration, a trend that surprisingly few commentators have identified, questioned or examined at any length? What are the implications of telling a story in this difficult, even risky way? And in light of the formal challenges it poses to reader as well as writer, why have contemporary works of fiction that are told collectively often been critically and commercially successful?

2 In this essay, I will attempt to answer such questions, examining the uses to which recent US writers have put the collective narrator in short stories and longer fiction.I will also explore the multiple tensions embodied by this dynamic narrative device, which often becomes thematically crucial, as it exposes the clash between public and private, the individual and the communal, freedom and conformity. The first-person plural narrator represents a paradoxical, mysterious and unsettling voice which is inclusive and exclusive, everyone and no-one, all-seeing yet strictly limited (cf. Costello, “Plural”). It can suggest any kind of collectivity: gendered, generational, racialized, religious, ideological, social, national. Thus, the choice of a particular personal pronoun is inherently political (cf. Morris 11-18; Woller 340-66; Richardson 43; and Costello, “Lyric”195, 199). Linguistically, the first-person plural pronoun can involve and implicate the reader as addressee and it can be interpreted on a microcosmic or macrocosmic, specific or metonymic scale (see Marcus 6-7; and Margolin 119). “We” is, like the pronoun “you,” flexible and ambiguous (Freedman 2-3, 13-15; Payne 125).

3 Examples of this unusual literary technique appear periodically across American fiction from William Faulkner’s classic tale, “A Rose for Emily” (1930), to later short fiction by a range of writers from Donald Barthelme and Susan Sontag to Steven Millhauser, Jhumpa Lahiri and Seth Fried. US novelists who employ the “we” voice include Joan Chase, Jeffrey Eugenides, Kate Walbert, Karen Joy Fowler, Joshua Ferris, Ed Park, Julie Otsuka, Justin Torres, and Hannah Pittard. The first-person plural narrator also enjoys a significant presence in American popular music and protest literature. Rather than attempting to produce a comprehensive survey of this wide array of works, my article will consider how selected US writers—Millhauser, Eugenides, Walbert, and Otsuka—employ this polysemic, defamiliarizing narrator, in each case offering a different version of the technique. It will read such “we” narratives comparatively because they share much common ground, both formally and thematically. It will thus depart from existing scholarship where critics seldom see US “we” narratives as being in conversation with each other (cf. Richardson 59). Yet the intertextual connections between, for example, Faulkner and Eugenides or Barthelme and Millhauser, and the impact upon later American novelists of Eugenides’ choice of this form, suggest the absolute logic of reading such texts relationally.

4 Studies of the “we” narrator in literature, often firmly situated within linguistic and narratological enquiry, have seldom addressed American literature *tout court*. An excellent exception is Adalaide Morris’s consideration of 1980s American fiction from a feminist perspective, analysing novels by Joan Chase, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, and Michael Dorris (18-25). Brian Richardson offers a magisterial account of the first-person plural narrator in modern fiction (37-60), but he goes well beyond the US to position the “we” narrator in global literary terms. He acknowledges the “relative rarity” of this narrative voice (56), yet contends earlier in his discussion that it is “a common strategy in contemporary fiction… [with] a relatively long though little known history that extends for over a century” (37). He is

referring here to European writers, most notably Joseph Conrad; his earliest American example is "A Rose for Emily." In US fiction, the "we" narrator has scarcely enjoyed a central place historically yet, as Richardson suggests, it has been more influential than commonly thought. Where critics have studied this device in relation to American writing specifically, they have usually focused on one writer—particularly Eugenides and Millhauser (see, for instance, Shostak 808-832; and Sammarcelli 39-54)—rather than reflecting upon the phenomenon more broadly and comparatively. Yet that wider perspective can yield valuable insights. The rise of the "we" voice in modern and particularly very recent American literature—beyond Bonnie Costello's claims in relation to poetry post-9/11 (Costello, "Plural")—has yet to be fully analysed, and in this essay, I will seek to fill that gap.

I will turn now to the collective voice in 20th-century American short fiction, specifically "A Rose for Emily" and Millhauser's "The Knife Thrower" (1998). As Laura Miller notes, creative writing manuals have traditionally had little to say about the first-person plural narrator ("Last Word"). Thus, in *Writing Fiction*, a bestselling guide, Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French discuss narration in the first-, second- and third-person singular but make only very brief reference to the first-person plural (301). One wonders whether they relegate the "we" voice to the margins because they regard it as too difficult to sustain, especially over an entire novel (cf. Margolin 132), the chosen genre of many new writers, or whether they do so because they consider this narrator so unusual as to be an irrelevance to both aspiring and established writers.

In their brief mention of the collective narrator, Burroway and Stuckey-French cite "A Rose for Emily" (301). In this tale, "we" stands for a particular community of townsfolk, arguably commenting from a male perspective. It suggests a stifling environment where an unmarried woman's options are highly circumscribed and an individual's private experience is of intense interest to all. "We" the community and "we" the reader can only find out a certain amount about the protagonist, Emily Grierson, in a storytelling process mimetic of a lack of answers in real life. "A Rose for Emily" invites multiple interpretations—hence the wealth of critical opinion on the text over many decades (see, for instance, Sullivan 159-78; Rodgers 117-29; and Melczarek 237-43)—and the ambiguities of its narrative voice are arguably central to its hermeneutic complexity. The narrative shifts in the story are clearly deliberate, particularly in what they reveal thematically, yet they also highlight some inherent problems surrounding the use of a first-person plural narrator. They show that it may be too limiting in imaginative terms, and even impossible creatively, for writers to maintain a "we" voice throughout an entire narrative, arguably because it is impossible in terms of achieving a strict mimesis of reality (Richardson 42, 58). This could explain why Faulkner's collective narrator is confined to selected moments within this short story, and why it is a particularly short story at that.

"A Rose for Emily," claimed in some quarters as "the most frequently anthologized American story of the twentieth century" (Volpe 104), often serves as an *Ur*-text and point of reference for modern American writers experimenting with this narrative voice. In its wake, a "we" narrator re-appears in Barthelme's macabre, blackly comic story, "Some of Us Had Been Threatening Our Friend Colby" (1968). Here Colby is eventually hanged by his friends because he has "gone too far" (Barthelme 161). The collective narrator is used subversively to explore outrageous and downright taboo ideas, and "Some of Us" thus recalls the link between form and theme in "A Rose for Emily," since Faulkner's "we" reveals shocking imagery through the discovery of a concealed corpse and the possibility of necrophilia.

In "The Knife Thrower," "we" depicts an audience literally sharing a collective experience as they bear witness to the gripping, suspenseful, live performance of Hensch, the renowned and notorious knife thrower of the story's title (cf. Ponce 90-95). As with "A Rose for Emily," the narrator represents an urban community, probably of the small-town variety again, since members of the audience know one another; and when Susan Parker volunteers to join in the act, they opine that she "might have been our daughter" (Millhauser 287). But only one other person in the audience, Laura, is actually named, leaving the reading audience—who imagine these scenes unfolding as the imaginary audience-within-the-text watches them—unclear about individual identity. Readers are addressees here, implicated in Millhauser's anonymous

"we," a group who remain passive observers yet, by failing to act, collude in Hensch's morally questionable and subversive activities, thus recalling the townsfolk's attitude towards Emily Grierson in "A Rose for Emily." Hensch's use of young people in his act ultimately lends the collective atmosphere of the story a sinister sense of mass indoctrination: the "we" of a cult.

10 The focus of the story is upon the single event of Hensch's performance. "The Knife Thrower" observes Aristotle's "three unities" of action, place and time, but historically the story is vague. It refers simply to "these times of ours" (282) and "times like these" (291; cf. Sammarcelli 44), while the arrival of a travelling performer in a small town and the performative act itself seem deliberately archaic. Through its repeated reference to "some of us" (Millhauser 281, 286, 291) and the narrator's claim twice in the closing paragraph that Hensch has "gone too far" (291), the story offers an intertextual nod to Barthelme's tale, which is similarly unclear historically and even more surreal.

Discussing his interest in this particular narrator, Millhauser has cited the "we" of Gustave Flaubert and Franz Kafka and its much earlier origins in

> the chorus in Greek tragedy, although there you have a visible group speaking together —sometimes as 'we,' sometimes as 'I'… I found myself increasingly drawn to this pronoun… because it allowed me to enact the drama of an entire community set against a person or group that threatens it, and… because the pronoun felt new and exciting, a pronoun that didn't drag in its wake one hundred billion stories, as in the case of an 'I' or a 'he.' It strikes me as a barely explored pronoun, full of possibilities. (qtd. in Chénetier)

11 According to Millhauser, then, this narrative voice is both recognizably ancient, consonant with his observation of the three unities in "The Knife Thrower," and excitingly new. This paradoxical quality arises because each "we" speaks for a different community; and it is precisely such complexity that may appeal to those American writers who claim the collective pronoun for themselves, as I will argue later in relation to recent fiction and its handling of gender, class and ethno-racial identity.

12 Unlike "A Rose for Emily," Millhauser sustains his first-person plural voice throughout "The Knife Thrower," yet he is also well aware of the possibilities of moving between "we" and other narrators. He claims that "when that happens… the 'we' becomes different…. In these double-pronoun stories… the 'we' is a mask behind which a particular narrator speaks for an entire group…. In a 'we' story that doesn't slip into 'I', the 'we' is more difficult to account for" (qtd. in Chénetier). The notion of "we" as a "mask" and the difficulty in "account[ing] for" a more persistent collective voice are directly relevant to some of the texts under discussion here, particularly Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, as I will argue shortly.

13 What about first-person plural narration in longer recent US fiction? Certain American novelists—for instance, Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Bharati Mukherjee in *Jasmine* (1989)—deploy this voice to narrate key moments in fiction which otherwise relies upon a more conventional "I" narrator. Across a wider novelistic canvas, the first-person plural is arguably more forbidding than other narrative pronouns and this may be why American writers, who are often highly aware of pronouns and their political power, have seldom explored it at length. Pre-2000, there are only a handful of examples. They include John Barth's *Sabbatical* (1982), Joan Chase's *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* (1983), and Eugenides' first novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). The last example is still the best known (cf. Wright). Hence I will focus upon it now, before turning to two key works of American "we" fiction published since Eugenides' influential debut.

14 *The Virgin Suicides* operates on a microcosmic scale, as with the small-town settings of the stories by Faulkner and Millhauser. Its "we" relates to a particular suburban neighborhood where the lens is trained on one street and one house within it: that of the Lisbon family. The novel reprises and reworks some of the tropes of "A Rose for Emily" through the notion of an enigmatic, largely female house viewed through spying, obsessive and, in this case, unquestionably male eyes and then interpreted through a community rumor mill. *The Virgin Suicides* also echoes Faulkner's tale and Barthelme's "Some of Us" in its link between a first-person plural narrator and shocking, even taboo subject matter: in this instance, teenage suicide. And as with the enigmatic circumstances surrounding Homer Barron's death in

Faulkner's text or the reason why Colby must be hanged in Barthelme's story, *The Virgin Suicides* is powered by an ultimately unsolvable mystery.

15 Eugenides' "we" voice moves proleptically and analeptically, shifting from the thoughts and emotions of a group of grown men to their recollections of teenage experience as they watched the five Lisbon girls from afar. Through this "recursive structuring," their communal voice becomes a smokescreen for an extreme, even unhealthy, interest, as their concern for the girls verges on the intrusive and pathological and produces, in Debra Shostak's view, a "solipsistic and objectifying vision of the sisters" (813, 824). The degree of their fixation also raises inevitable questions about their narrative reliability. The men's obsessive attitude to the Lisbon sisters is problematic because the reader cannot be expected to share their interest in the minutiae of the Lisbon family's daily life. At the same time, the narrator's attention to detail is testament to the power of the men's interest, since the need, both materially and emotionally, to recall and preserve such objects has warped their subsequent relationships and frozen them in time psychologically. Like the Lisbon girls, whose lives were stopped forever when they killed themselves in adolescence, the men seem not fully to have entered the adult world. That world is figured bleakly for those girls who continue living as comprising "college, husbands, child-rearing, unhappiness only dimly perceived—bound, in other words, for life" (Eugenides 235). It is as though suicide, through the eyes of the collective narrator, is somehow the preferred option for young women.

16 Eugenides intersperses his first-person plural voice with other pronouns: the third-person singular and third-person plural. This linguistic point is overtly highlighted when the boys speak to the Lisbon girls on the phone and realize that "we didn't know which girl it was, and didn't know what to say. Still, we hung on together—her, them, us" (194). The first-person singular is a rare presence, reflected in Cecilia Lisbon's diary, where

> as the diary progresses, Cecilia begins to recede from her sisters and… from personal narrative of any kind. The first person singular ceases almost entirely, the effect akin to a camera's pulling away from the characters at the end of a movie, to show, in a series of dissolves, their house, street, city, country, and finally planet, which not only dwarfs but obliterates them. (44)

17 In line with this erasure of the narrative "I," *The Virgin Suicides* suggests the triumph of group belonging over selfhood during teenage years: characters remain at the stage where they have not yet individuated themselves from their families. In this privileging of a collective rather than individual status, the narrative emphasizes "them"—the Lisbons—over "us" (the boys). After all, the identity of the "we" narrator remains uncertain, its own mystery paralleling the one the men cannot solve. Thus, "we" comprises different boys and seems to shift and expand. Later, "we" seems to include the Lisbon sisters, too: "we knew that the girls were our twins, that *we all* existed in space like animals with identical skins" (43; emphasis added).

18 It is not only the Lisbon sisters who are unknowable, then, but also the boys themselves. Just as the material details they accumulate can only ever be a substitute for a real understanding of the Lisbon girls and their untimely deaths, so those details stand in for a fuller characterization of the group narrator. As with Eugenides' second novel, *Middlesex* (2002), irony, detachment and an "impossible voice" (qtd. in Foer; see also Miller, "Sex") are favored over psychological depth. The narrative distance created by the "we" voice in *The Virgin Suicides* also corresponds to the novel's more generalized status as a swansong to youth and the intensity of first experiences. At its fine conclusion, "we" has become all middle-aged men who mourn a lost (adolescent) love. This "we" is generational, too, a point which becomes clear at the end of the novel:

> something sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls. Our parents thought it had to do with our music, our godlessness, or the loosening of morals regarding sex we hadn't even had… The Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong with the country, the pain it inflicted on even its most innocent citizens. (Eugenides 231)

19 In generational terms, however, "we" also relates to a very particular young adulthood: that of wealthy, white, suburban Detroit in the 1970s. In other words, just as "we" is gendered and historically precise, so it is also raced and classed, where "we" with "our pink faces" (214) stand distinct from "them": the dispossessed black communities of inner-city Detroit. In the

boys’ world, from which the novel’s gaze never falters, African Americans are present only as domestics.

20 Pronominal shifts reflect the polyphonic nature of the novel, where the reader hears from lots of named characters at different points as they contribute their version of events. Thus, the central “we,” trying to comprehend the mystery of the suicides, requires a larger collective effort in which other figures must bear witness in order to create a narrative of fictional testimony (cf. Shostak 816). Facing a shared sense of guilt that they could not save the Lisbon sisters and “shame that has never gone away” (Eugenides 215), the boys’ joint actions carry a greater resonance than one individual reaching out to another. “We” is deployed to suggest a process of collective mourning and memorialization, which commemorates not only the lost girls but also a vanished era and community. Eugenides achieves this without relying on nostalgia, using “we” to chronicle, but not romanticize, the complexities and ambiguities of a particular generation and society. He also brings to the fore the specific identity politics of the “we” narrator in ways distinct from the other examples of the form I have analyzed so far.

21 In the past 10 years, a series of American “we” novels has appeared, including Kate Walbert’s *Our Kind* (2004) and Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011), to cite the two texts I will consider here. That these novels are short suggests the difficulty of sustaining such a demanding, “heterogeneous and ambiguous” pronoun (Margolin 119) over a longer work. It also recalls the relative brevity of *The Virgin Suicides*. Indeed, Eugenides’ bold and acclaimed use of a choric voice in his first novel arguably started a trend for first-time American novelists to speak collectively: for example, Joshua Ferris in *Then We Came to the End* (2007), Ed Park in *Personal Days* (2008), Hannah Pittard in *The Fates Will Find Their Way* (2011), and Justin Torres in *We The Animals* (2011). In terms of short fiction, Françoise Sammarcelli also reads Millhauser’s “we” stories, beyond “The Knife Thrower,” as clearly influenced by Eugenides’ first-person plural narration (48). For a novelist, such a voice can ensure an arresting and striking entry onto the literary scene. In this sense, “we” resembles another unusual and polysemic narrator: the second-person pronoun or narrative “you”—in English simultaneously singular and plural, formal and informal—deployed to bold effect in Jay McInerney’s debut novel, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) (cf. Preston; see also Davis 173-183; and Richardson 17-36).

22 Walbert’s *Our Kind* illustrates once more the specificities of “we” narration and their link to form, since this is a novel as short story cycle. Here the voice belongs to a circle of elderly, wealthy, WASP women living in an unnamed, probably north-eastern American town; their ethno-racial background is implied in opposition to what it is not, rather than explicitly spelled out. Once again, this is a small-scale setting, perhaps because for writers, this lends a tighter focus to the collective voice. *Our Kind* is a domestic novel which never moves away from the women’s narrow lives, reflecting their sedentary existence. As with Eugenides’ “we,” this collective narrator is both historically specific—“we were married in 1953. Divorced in 1976” (Walbert 10)—and socially universal, since the group experiences the blend of sexism and ageism endured by many forgotten older women in contemporary societies. Again recalling Eugenides’ novel, *Our Kind* also evokes a lost world without sentimentality or nostalgia. Instead, the novel is written in a terse, pithy, elliptical manner. And, however neglected and disappointed they may be, these tough, privileged, sometimes cruel women do not always invite the reader’s sympathy.

23 Beyond this question of a readerly ambivalence towards Walbert’s fictional “we,” the voice itself is necessary to the women precisely because of their sense of marginalization, aloneness and invisibility. Its *esprit de corps* reflects a bravado crucial to their survival. The use of a communal voice is about their need to shore up an identity in the face of social obsolescence, impending mortality, narrow horizons and wasted opportunities without the support and company of husbands, children, and grandchildren or the benefits and pleasures of professional status. In these absences, their solace is to relate to other women like themselves. At an earlier stage in their lives, as young mothers, the “we” acknowledges that the group are “together, not for companionship, exactly, or high regard, but because we’re in the same boat” (131).

In this "we" of either the present moment or a shared past, there is little place for individual introspection.

24 Like other "we" narratives, *Our Kind* deploys a range of pronouns, emphasizing its own narrative experimentation and drawing attention to interrelationships in a fresh and dramatic way. When the narrator asserts that "you need not tell us Esther's story is absurd, a fairy tale" (26), "you" is both narratee and readerly addressee. Other pronouns become synecdochic, as with the "He" of a chapter entitled "The Intervention." This figure represents all men who have disappointed the women: "our faithless husband, our poor father. He is our bad son, our schemer, our rogue. He is our coward in the conflict, our liar. He has betrayed all He has promised" (15).

25 If a shared identity gives the women's lives greater depth, it is also used for the purposes of self-definition in relation to other elderly women, for instance, "a revolving group of biddies we called Them We Do Not Wish to Become, wizened gnomes, the humps on their backs like strange, bulky packages" (64). The "we" group engages in its own ageism and sexism here by referring to these other old women as "biddies" and "wizened gnomes." This suggests a competitiveness about how to grow old, but also the communal narrator's fear of death, as "we" separates itself from the moribund aura of such women, later distanced at a local hospice as "they" (101). Recalling Millhauser's earlier point, "we" is a mask here, offering a show of unity and togetherness and a way for individual "I" voices to hide. This is made explicit when the group discusses Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), at the hospice: "we have our opinions… we just prefer not to express them before a consensus has been reached" (102). The force of that "consensus" may be why Rachel Brownstein deems this a "coercive… first-person-plural narrative voice" (367). "We" is also intentionally unknowable here, as with the narrator of *The Virgin Suicides*. As Walbert has noted, "the more I wrote in this voice, I realized you can't get inside anyone's head specifically, so that forces you to learn everything you know about the characters through what they say about themselves" (qtd. in Hogan).

26 Walbert tackles the question of how to conclude a "we" narrative by turning the collective voice into an individual one. Thus, the narrative moves away from the unspecified present of its first-person plural voice to the distant college days of one character, Viv, and the life choices she made as a young woman. This final chapter, intriguingly entitled "The Beginning of the End," offers Viv's free indirect, third-person singular perspective which in turn highlights the wider narrative unreliability of the novel. By concluding at a remove from "we," Walbert finally gives Viv, who chose marriage over a professional career, a voice in a "conversation [which] never gets around to her" (Walbert 195). The use of "we" has meant that the rest of the women have notbeen fully heard either, thus reflecting the ways in which, through the gendered limitations of the society in which they came of age, they were denied individuality. Yet Walbert's spotlight on a particular character and the disappointments of her past in a pre-feminist America gives the novel's ending a greater poignancy. This is precisely because the "we" mask is allowed to slip. Instead, the reader gains access to specific, rather than generalized, pain and regret. This results, I would argue, not in a kind of narrative "disappointment," as Jennifer Egan contends (n.p.), but rather in a much sharper sense of lost opportunity. At the same time, the "she" of Viv is—like the "He" discussed earlier—metonymic of a whole generation of thwarted women.

27 Otsuka tells a markedly different American story in her historical novel, *The Buddha in the Attic*. Here the first-person plural narrator is properly rooted in the past: the history, creatively reconstructed, of Japanese American women who came to the United States in the early decades of the 20th century as "picture brides" to ethnic Japanese men they had never met. Many years after the historical retrieval and semi-fictionalized testimony of such groundbreaking Asian American works as Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980), Otsuka's novel is powered by a similar need to tell what remains a largely unknown story. The story of the picture brides is given greater political and rhetorical power through its collective narration—its specificities requiring a special narrative voice—and also because it has been rendered fictionally. This produces an artistic, dramatic work with a wider reach than the many historical sources upon which it is based.

22 Recalling *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Buddha in the Attic* is a work of memorialization but its “we” moves away from individualized mourning. Rather, it commemorates the lives of a whole generation of overlooked, oppressed women. In the era before the Japanese American internment of World War II, where “it would only be a matter of time until all traces of us were gone” (Otsuka 104), Otsuka fashions a novel in which the destroyed documents and property of this community can be enshrined and safely contained for perpetuity. Public memory and restitution in this contemporary first-person plural novel are made explicit through Otsuka’s use of epigraphs, which include a quotation from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes: “some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them” (n.p.). In reinstating these women by providing their own “memorial,” *The Buddha in the Attic* creates a large number of named characters, as distinct from the small group of women in *Our Kind*. This reflects a community in its sheer volume and renders the invisible visible to mainstream America. To that end, the novel pays tribute to the full variety of first-generation Japanese American or *issei* women in terms of age, regional roots in Japan, and differing experiences in 1920s and 30s America. Otsuka’s “we” thus bears witness to the poverty, squalor, backbreaking work, marital rape, and institutionalized racism such women endured. As Michael Upchurch contends, “the novel is informed by Otsuka’s sure knowledge that the only way a collective voice can be animated and authentic is if it’s filled with internal contradictions” (n.p.). Otsuka has noted that “since Japan is a very group-oriented culture… it made sense to speak of the picture brides as a collective entity” (qtd. in Ryan). In other words, the “we” narrator of *The Buddha in the Attic* is an example of *e pluribus unum* or “out of the many, one,” a quintessentially American motto, but relating here to a Japanese as much as a US context.

29 Once again, this narrative voice is differentiated into separate pronouns: the “we” of specifically-named “picture brides” but also of the wider Japanese American community; the third-person singular and plural of the women’s children, husbands, mothers, and white employers; the shifting “you” which can mean both *issei* women and white people; and the “I” of italicized snatches of women’s speech. At the same time, Otsuka’s “we” is more sustained than that of Eugenides or Walbert. In this short work, the collective pronoun is there all the time, reinforcing the novel’s memorializing function in incantatory and sometimes claustrophobic fashion, rather like the women’s experiences on the overcrowded boats bringing them to the United States. For Otsuka’s *issei* characters, “we’re in the same boat” is not simply a useful turn of phrase as it is for the group depicted in Walbert’s *Our Kind*.

31 This sense of narrative confinement through a relentlessly communal voice ensures that the women in *The Buddha in the Attic* have no identity outside the group. Such a device reflects their urgent need for solidarity and belonging in the face of suffering, hardship and loss in 20th-century America as well as the unremitting pace of life, work and the course of events leading up to the World War II internment. But it also means that the women’s individuality is erased. As with *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrative distance resulting from a community portrayal replaces the psychological complexity afforded through a first- or third-person singular voice. This aspect of *The Buddha in the Attic* has been criticized by some commentators, arguably because it repeats the historical dehumanization of Japanese Americans through internment (see, for example, Charles).

32 In Otsuka’s hands, “we” is nonetheless rich and polysemic: it is by turns semi-mythical, wise, panoramic and chilling, used both to evoke the mysteries of the pre-internment moment and the horrors of forced evacuation following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. It is a fluent voice, allowing women with sometimes little English, who are silenced by mainstream society, the literary space to speak, their words gaining incremental impact through the power of shared narration. “We” is also used at the novel’s conclusion to signify a different collectivity: the Caucasian townspeople left behind after the Japanese American departure. They experience a mixture of guilt and incomprehension at the absence of their former neighbors, schoolmates, and employees: “the Japanese have left us and we don’t know where they are” (Otsuka 128). The narrative draws a blank on this, not saying anything specific about the next chapter in

Japanese American communal experience, as though to comment on a continuing mainstream ignorance towards this episode in US history (cf. Johnston).

32 Critical opinion on Otsuka's "we" voice has been more divided than on its use by Eugenides or Walbert. Alida Becker complains, for instance, that the switch to a different collective voice at the end of the novel signals a "disappointing" loss of connection to the novel's *issei* women (n.p.), while Ursula LeGuin discusses the novel's distancing split between "We and They/You." She points out that if Otsuka's "we" excludes, this is because early Japanese American communities were themselves excluded, yet LeGuin also expresses discomfort with the novel's conclusion. She acknowledges her own subject position as a "white American" aged "12 when 'the Japanese disappeared' from my town, Berkeley… [which] has troubled and informed my mind for many years" (n.p.). Otsuka has stated that her final assumption of a different narrative "we" was intended as "the perfect, unexpected ending" and an answer to the conundrum of historical amnesia on the part of the "Californians who'd been alive during WWII who told me that they had 'no idea' about the camps" (qtd. in Yuhas). One can certainly read this material as more sensitive and contentious than that of the other contemporary "we" fiction considered here. The issues it raises about white historical culpability and continuing mainstream discrimination towards ethnic minorities, especially following 9/11—parallels Otsuka has drawn quite explicitly in interviews (see Johnston)—may explain why national reviewers, often white, have objected to aspects of the novel. Perhaps their unease also relates to the different quality of Otsuka's "we": ethnically other from many of the critics reviewing the novel. This alternative American voice is also the most sustained and anonymized example of those analyzed here. Yet for all the claims by reviewers that it is distancing, the communal narrator actually appears to have the opposite effect on them, since it is sufficiently involving for them to want to follow the *issei* into the internment camps (see, for example, Becker and LeGuin).

33 In this essay, I have argued that modern American "we" fictions, both short stories and novels, share a number of common characteristics. Such works are often relatively brief. They deploy pronominal shifts—with "I" almost always absent—and polyphony; they are often recursive in structure; and they face a particular challenge in how to conclude. Narratives told in this difficult, risky voice often contain thematic material which is subversive, dangerous or taboo. This is especially true of US short stories. In novels and short fiction alike, however, the small town is a favored setting to explore the moral implications of the "we" voice. This may be because its diminutive scale intensifies the disturbing notion of people spying on and speculating about one another. The small town also represents the wider community—it can be read as society in miniature—and in the case of the short story/short story cycle, this idea is further highlighted by the narrow parameters and narrative efficiency of the short fiction form itself.

34 Often linked to a central mystery of psychology and plot, the "we" narrator—whether telling a personal story or one belonging to somebody else—is generally unknowable. Like many other fictional voices, it is also unreliable, with its experimentalism and relative unusualness drawing attention to its metafictional qualities and calling into question any claims to "truth." Its unknowability works against the possibility of psychological depth and this can lead to a sense of readerly detachment, even frustration (cf. Miller, "Last Word"). Yet this has not deterred a wave of contemporary American writers from writing in just such a voice, often to critical and popular acclaim. Their choice of narrator can be linked to a different reading of the contemporary *zeitgeist*. As Brian Richardson argues, "it is the very ambiguity and fluctuations of the precise identity of the 'we' that are among its most interesting, dramatic, and appealing features, and most apposite for an age that eschews fixed essences" (56). The modern relevance of this narrative voice may account for the bestselling status of some of the works I have examined and for the literary prizes and award nominations they have received.

35 For some American writers, the first-person plural narrator is about mourning and commemoration (cf. Costello, "Lyric" 194). "We" is both universal and highly specific, temporally and spatially. It is both the voice of established authority and of radicalism and it also relates to a more generalized need to render visible people and communities which

have suffered invisibility or marginalization (see Richardson 46, 49-50): for example, women, the elderly, and ethnic and sexual minorities. From Claude McKay's sonnet, "If We Must Die" (1919), to the labor and Civil Rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome" (1963); from Carlos Bulosan's semi-fictionalized autobiography, *America is in the Heart* (1946), to Toni Morrison and Bharati Mukherjee; from Walbert and Otsuka to Justin Torres, America as a white, male, heterosexual domain is reclaimed and remade. In mobilizing a communal voice, a fictionalized community can gain in strength. But that show of power often hides a more precarious sense of status and belonging.

36 If such majority/minority dynamics, and the "we" narrator itself, have a longer history in the United States, how might one account for the rise and success of this form in recent American fiction? It is tempting to attribute this to the aftermath of 9/11, a national tragedy which resulted in a greater need for collective belonging and a reversion to the politics of *e pluribus unum*. How better to signal this than to speak in a plural voice? The copious use of "we," "our" and "us," defined in opposition to a shadowy "they," in President George W. Bush's post-9/11 speeches (Bush, "Address"; Bush, "September 11th") captures the necessity of both reflecting and bringing into being a national collectivity—an "imagined community," in Benedict Anderson's well-known phrase (*passim*)—for 21st-century America. Yet the presumption of any politician to speak on behalf of others—and especially a resolutely right-wing politician at such a politically charged historical moment—may have led some American writers to reject this post-9/11 national vision and its attendant coercion to belong and conform. The desire to examine other Americas beyond the specific socio-religious values of Bush's Republicanism —or beyond a perceived "mainstream," authoritarian, privileged version of national history —may have compelled writers to offer their own American "we": an alternative "one" out of the "many" (cf. Costello, "Plural").

37 Conversely, the rise of the "we" voice may have little to do with the impact of 9/11. Even when the fiction I have examined post-dates this historic event, it more obviously reflects the powerful legacy of a Faulknerian "we" and more recently, Eugenides' influential use of this narrator in *The Virgin Suicides* where he exposes its classed, racialized and gendered dimensions. Thus, narrative "we" sometimes faces the costs of ethnic and/or gender difference. It also confronts an uncertain early life or old age. Elsewhere it is used to communicate hidden and forgotten histories to a wider public. In the face of a rapidly changing modern age and the moral questions raised by both individualism and public memory, some US writers respond, then, by writing collectively. They may be seeking a fresh voice, a 21st-century "we," in a climate of postmodern ennui, while reacting to earlier examples of the form. The drive to offer a different kind of narration recalls Millhauser's claim that "we" to him "felt new and exciting, a pronoun that didn't drag in its wake one hundred billion stories, as in the case of an 'I' or a 'he'" (qtd. in Chénetier). Despite a longer lineage in American fiction (cf. Richardson 38-39, 47-48, 50-54) and a longstanding presence in US popular culture, poetry and protest writing, "we" still feels "new and exciting," subject to endless reinvention and reimagining: the perfect pronoun to reflect "a world at once more proximate and more divided than ever" (Costello, "Lyric" 205). It is the ideal fictional voice to examine the complexities and contradictions of contemporary America.

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Abstract

Historically, the first-person plural narrator has been rare in US fiction, and it is both enigmatic and technically demanding. Yet an increasing number of American novelists and short story writers have turned to this formal device over the past 20 years and particularly since 9/11. How might one account for this rise in “we” narration, a trend that surprisingly few commentators have identified, questioned or examined at any length? What are the implications of telling a story in this difficult, even risky way? And in light of the formal challenges it poses to reader

as well as writer, why have contemporary works of fiction that are told collectively often been critically and commercially successful? In this essay, I will attempt to answer such questions, examining how US writers from William Faulkner to Jeffrey Eugenides, and Kate Walbert to Julie Otsuka have used the collective narrator in short stories and longer fiction and finally reflecting upon the use of “we” in recent American political discourse.

Index terms

Keywords : Donald Barthelme, Jeffrey Eugenides, Julie Otsuka, Kate Walbert, Steven Millhauser, William Faulkner
Keywords : first-person plural, intertextuality, narrative “we, narrator, post-9/11 America, ” contemporary fiction